



WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF
Natural Resources
Doug Sutherland - Commissioner of Public Lands

Public review period extended on Proposed “Powerhouse” Gravel Sale

Work continues with Sultan Basin Communities

On December 5, 2000, the Board of Natural Resources authorized the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to auction a sand and gravel sale known as “Powerhouse” on state lands just north of Sultan.

The proposed sale is on state Forest Board trust and School trust lands. While protecting native fish and wildlife, water, and other public resources, DNR earns revenue from these lands to fund Snohomish County services and help K-12 public schools.

As manager and steward of these trust lands, DNR is reaching out to the community to listen and address local concerns about the proposed sale.

“Powerhouse” process

On January 27, 2001, DNR Northwest Region staff attended a community meeting that revealed strong local concern about the proposed sale. DNR considered the best ways to provide additional opportunities for public involvement to assist future decision-making.

On February 2, Doug Sutherland, Commissioner of Public Lands and administrator of DNR, postponed the proposed “Powerhouse” sale indefinitely, and requested an opportunity for dialogue with the community to gather input.

On February 21, DNR attended the Sultan City council meeting to welcome full participation by the Mayor and Council to join the community at large in helping to come to alternative solutions. DNR also met with 39th district State Legislators to include them in the continuing discussion and hear their ideas.

As a result of further meetings on February 26 with Snohomish leaders and PUD representatives, DNR decided to extend the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) process regarding the site to encourage additional public comment. DNR will issue a revised set of SEPA documents for review, including more detailed information.

Current status

DNR is seeking a thorough, open evaluation of the “Powerhouse” proposal, guided by significant public input:

- In addition to the extended SEPA public review period, in June DNR will hold a workshop / open house in Sultan for listening to the community.
- A DRAFT SEPA checklist will be available for public review.
- The community already has expressed a number of concerns, which also will be taken into account.
- Future action on the proposal by DNR will consider all public input.

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Community Outreach

Patty Henson, 360-902-1010

Media Contact

Jane Chavey, 360-902-1721

More information

State trust lands protect fish, wildlife while funding schools and more

After the listing of the northern spotted owl and marbled murrelet under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) in the early 1990s, and with the likely listing of salmon and other species on the horizon, DNR decided to take a broad landscape-wide approach to protecting habitat. Over several years DNR developed a 70-year Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for about 1.8 million acres of forestland, mostly in western Washington. The HCP was approved by the Board of Natural Resources, and signed with federal agencies in January 1997. The plan provides guidelines for DNR to protect and enhance fish and wildlife habitat while providing a constant flow of revenue to public schools, universities and other trust beneficiaries, and providing recreation opportunities for the public.

All activities on DNR-managed state forestlands west of the Cascade Mountains are designed to meet this commitment. This includes timber harvesting activities, road building, extraction of gravel or other material, building construction, etc. The HCP habitat protection guidelines would apply to any mining project such as the proposed “Powerhouse” sale.

Protection of The “Powerhouse” Site

As manager and steward, DNR protects the long-term health and productivity of all the trust lands in its care. And as required by state regulation, when portions of any gravel or rock mining quarry are completed, the lands are restored, topsoil replaced, and trees planted. This mandatory reclamation minimizes impacts to habitat, and erosion. It also provides future trust revenue from forest production, habitat and public use for this and future generations.

DNR has been using rock from Powerhouse site for about 10 years for roadwork on the trust forestlands in the area. DNR continues to do so.

In June 1995, Snohomish County identified the proposed “Powerhouse” gravel site in its comprehensive plan as a long-term significant mineral resource. The area is zoned for commercial forest and mineral extraction.

In the same year, DNR drilled the site to check gravel quality, established an estimate of rock and gravel volumes, and obtained preliminary groundwater data. In 1997, a private site evaluation, including hydrologic, wetland, and soil studies using available data. After considering environmental and economic factors, DNR proposed this site for the gravel auction, and completed the first phase of a SEPA environmental review for approval to auction the materials. The auction was postponed, pending further review. If auctioned, the agreement would have a twenty-year duration, and would require protection for salmon and other wildlife native to the site. The contract would also require that social impacts such as transportation, air quality, water quality, and public safety and health be addressed. If the project moves forward, at any time, gravel removal would cover no more than 40 acres of the roughly 560-acre site.

Before making further decisions about “Powerhouse,” DNR will work with the community on a proposal for the project that will meet the trust responsibilities while minimizing negative impacts to the community, and possibly help the community achieve some of its goals.

Demand increases for sand, gravel and rock in Washington

Some of the most valuable geologic resources in Washington are sand, gravel and rock. Both value and consumption have grown dramatically even in the last few years. In 1995, production was 41.6 million tons of sand and gravel in annual consumption per person, and 17.4 million tons of rock, or

10.9 tons per person. By 1998 it was more than 51 million tons of sand and gravel and 16 million tons of crushed rock per person per year.

Demand is directly tied to growth. Sand, gravel and rock are needed for buildings, concrete and asphalt. Many of the known sources are in a few small areas of the state. And many of those known sources are inaccessible with cities, homes or roads nearby or on top of them.

The SEPA process

Phase One SEPA – Proposal phase and public involvement

A phased SEPA process is sometimes necessary if all the potential impacts of a proposed project are not known at a time when a decision is needed. For a mining activity on state lands, the first phase of SEPA environmental review provides the opportunity to develop a proposal to mine sand and gravel, but does not authorize mining activities.

The SEPA checklist for the first phase includes requirements such as those DNR defines in its Habitat Conservation Plan to protect riparian (streamside) buffers, and other issues such as visual and noise buffers, and air and water quality. The SEPA review, and public comments received during this phase, assists DNR to develop auction materials that reflect the protective commitments DNR has for the site.

However, detailed environmental affects can be better addressed once specific mining activities have been identified – such as the location and amount of gravel to be removed, rate of removal, transportation impacts, and more. If a purchaser were selected at auction, these issues would be addressed through specific proposals put forward by that purchaser. These specific proposals for the mining project would be subject to SEPA review during phase II.

Phase Two of SEPA – Project development and public involvement

The project development phase begins if a purchaser is found at auction. This triggers the permitting process. It also stimulates review of a detailed development plan – the sequence of areas to be opened for active mining, how the operation is to be handled, transportation of the materials, and reclamation plan. Based on public involvement during the review process, and information gathered during this SEPA phase, each of the elements is reviewed and modified under the permitting process.

Generally, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) also is required for a gravel quarry. This provides several additional opportunities for public input. It addresses potential negative impacts to surface and ground water quality or wetlands, air quality, nearby sensitive species or their habitat, or of transportation and noise impacts to nearby residents as well as potential ways to mitigate those impacts.

If a purchaser is found at auction, DNR usually turns over responsibility for the SEPA project phase to a local agency, such as Snohomish County. The purchaser is responsible for all permits. Depending on the site, the process might include:

- Environmental Impact Statement, as required
- Conditional use permit and/or rezone with Snohomish County
- Road Use Permit with Snohomish County Public Works
- Puget Sound Air Pollution Control Authority permits
- Department of Ecology and Sand Gravel General Permit for surface and groundwater discharge. This covers the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit
- Surface Mine Act Reclamation permit from the State Geologists office
- Forest Practices Permit from the DNR